

VZCZCXRO5909

OO RUEHAG RUEHAST RUEHDA RUEHDBU RUEHDF RUEHFL RUEHIK RUEHKW RUEHLA
RUEHLM RUEHLZ RUEHNP RUEHPOD RUEHROV RUEHSK RUEHSR RUEHVK RUEHYG
DE RUEHTH #0901/01 1491303

ZNR UUUUU ZZH

O R 291304Z MAY 09

FM AMEMBASSY ATHENS

TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 0236

INFO EUROPEAN POLITICAL COLLECTIVE

RHEHAAA/NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL WASHINGTON DC

RUEAIIA/CIA WASHINGTON DC

RUEHBUL/AMEMBASSY KABUL 0005

RUEHIL/AMEMBASSY ISLAMABAD 0001

RUEHTH/AMEMBASSY ATHENS

RUEILB/NCTC WASHINGTON DC

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 03 ATHENS 000901

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PHUM](#) [PTER](#) [GR](#) [KIRF](#) [ASEC](#) [ABLD](#) [PREF](#) [SMIG](#)

SUBJECT: Greece: Muslim Migrants Protest in Athens, Radicalization Fears Grow

REF: 09 ATHENS 315

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: Violent demonstrations and riots involving Muslim migrants rocked downtown Athens throughout the month of May, bringing relations between migrants and the Greek government to a new nadir and fueling fears of Islamic radicalization in Greece. Muslim community leaders and media reports attributed the deterioration of relations between Muslim migrants and the government to a combination of factors: the skyrocketing growth of the Muslim illegal migrant population, stepped-up police patrols and enforcement efforts against immigrants, poor prospects for economic and social integration for migrants, and the lack of an official mosque in Athens for Muslim worshippers. These May clashes follow earlier confrontations between migrants and police at the asylum processing center of Petrou Ralli and in the port city of Patras, where Muslim immigrants have long-simmering grievances with authorities over Greece's deficient asylum process and over police crackdowns (see REFTEL). With Greek policymakers focused on upcoming European Parliament elections and the governing conservative New Democracy party unlikely to propose comprehensive immigration reform measures, violent clashes between Muslim migrants and police could well continue. END SUMMARY.

MUSLIM PROTESTS: LINKED TO POLICE CRACKDOWNS

¶2. (SBU) Muslim migrants and pro-immigrant groups clashed with police and right-wing organizations in Athens multiple times during the month of May. Like previous migrant-related protests in Athens and the port city of Patras (see REFTEL), the May demonstrations took place in reaction to police enforcement or eviction efforts. In early May, after a request from a landlord, police announced a plan to evict around 600 illegal migrant squatters from the old site of the Athens Court of Appeals near Omonia square. On May 9, after an anti-immigrant rally by the Committee of Greek Citizens and the neo-Nazi group Golden Dawn, pro-communist, human rights, and pro-immigrant organizations held a counter-demonstration. Media reported that nine police and three migrants were injured in subsequent clashes between the two sides, and that there was significant damage to surrounding buildings and parked cars. Observers for Doctors Without Borders (MSF), a medical NGO, were present at the demonstrations and stated that the courthouse site, lacking plumbing and electricity and filled with trash and human waste, was an "epidemiological time bomb".

¶3. (SBU) On May 19, a group of around 30 migrants reportedly threw stones at and injured a police officer patrolling near the courthouse site. On May 20, approximately 1,000 Afghan migrants held a demonstration and occupied Omonia square, protesting against an incident in which a police officer allegedly damaged a copy of the Qur'an while performing an identity check on an immigrant. The crowd scuffled with riot police, who responded with tear gas. The Greek government promised to investigate the Qur'an incident fully but condemned the violence, with Deputy Minister for Public Order Christos Markoyiannakis stating that "economic migrants living in Greece must respect the law." In what media reports called a possible right-wing extremist attack on Muslim migrants, on May 24, an unofficial prayer room was set on fire by unidentified arsonists. Five Bangladeshis sleeping in the apartment were rescued by firefighters. Pro-immigrant and anti-immigrant groups have planned separate follow-up demonstrations on May 29.

MUSLIM LEADERS FEAR GROWING RADICALIZATION

¶3. (SBU) Naim El-Ghadour, President of the Union of Greek Muslims, told Poloff in February that the risk of radicalization had increased among Greece's migrant Muslims--especially among the more

ATHENS 00000901 002 OF 003

transient and less integrated Pakistani, Afghan, and Somali communities. (El-Ghadour, an Arab Egyptian, stated that Arab communities in Greece tended to be more settled and financially stable--and thus less at-risk for radicalization.) El-Ghadour said that police crackdowns, discrimination against Muslim migrants, and persistent delays in the construction of an official mosque and Muslim cemetery in Athens had embittered Muslim migrants. Imams in the hundreds of unofficial prayer rooms throughout Greece tended to minister to and come from ethnic-specific communities, and El-Ghadour feared that imams from newer Muslim migrant groups lacked religious education and adhered to more extremist views. The Greek government, El-Ghadour concluded, was indirectly fomenting radicalization by continuing to delay the construction of an official mosque. (NOTE: Government ministries announced in early May that land set aside for a mosque was occupied by the Greek Navy, which claimed the cost to relocate its facilities would be over \$100 million. Construction of the mosque was approved by Parliament in 2002 but has not commenced. END NOTE.)

¶4. (SBU) In May interviews to Al-Jazeera and the internet news outlet Islamonline.net, El-Ghadour characterized the Pakistanis, Afghans, and Bangladeshis who participated in the recent unrest as "young kids, maybe 19, 20 years old, without jobs, and facing hunger" everyday. The slightest religious provocation, according to El-Ghadour, could easily trigger a violent reaction--as seen in the Qur'an desecration incident. Scott McCracken, Director for Refugee Ministries at Helping Hands, a local faith-based NGO, concurred that the risk of radicalization had grown, telling Poloff that Pakistani, Afghan, and Somali young men and families who had regularly attended faith-based and government-run food kitchens in years past had stopped coming--not because the need for food had lessened, but because some imams and leaders of certain Muslim ethnic groups had instructed followers to avoid associating with Christians or Greek authorities.

¶5. (SBU) Members of the Muslim minority in Thrace, primarily of Turkish and Balkan origin, have taken pains to distinguish themselves from Muslim migrants. In November 2008, Muslim religious and community leaders in Thrace told Poloff that the

Muslim minority was "not like the migrants," did not associate socially or religiously with migrant communities, and had "no threat of terrorism" in its ranks. El-Ghadour confirmed that Muslim migrants in Athens did not intermingle with Thracian Muslims. In fact, sectarian tensions existed: A mufti (religious leader) in Thrace noted that any Pakistani or Afghani migrants who died crossing the Greece-Turkey border were buried separate from members of the Muslim minority, while El-Ghadour noted that Muslim migrants did not want to "be seen as Turks" and resented a lack of support from Thracian Muslims on migration-related issues.

COMMENT: SHORT-TERM SOLUTIONS, LONG-TERM CHALLENGES

¶ 6. (SBU) The number of general demonstrations and violence in 2009 involving Muslim migrants is unprecedented for Greece. Prior to this year, Muslim migrant protests were limited to spontaneous and localized grievances, such as demonstrations against alleged police brutality at the Petrou Ralli asylum processing center. As the waves of migration have increased, however, these minority populations have grown and developed increasingly organized informal community networks. In the charged and protest-prone atmosphere since the widespread December 2008 Athens riots by Greek students and anarchists, the presence of these migrant groups, combined with government inaction (or missteps) on issues of importance to Muslims, has resulted in some Muslim migrants demonstrating publicly and more violently than ever before. This points to a long-term challenge for Greece. We have reported about the overwhelming numbers of illegal immigrants entering Greece after transiting Turkey--especially from Pakistan and Afghanistan, source countries for which migrant numbers are likely to increase--and the Greek government's call for more border resources from the EU and more cooperation from Turkey and other countries along the migration route to control the flow. We have also

ATHENS 00000901 003 OF 003

proposed re-starting a DS/ATA Anti-Terrorism Assistance program for Greek law enforcement. But in addition to becoming more effective on the enforcement side, the Greek government needs more creative engagement with and practical actions to address the needs of the Muslim migrant community. Previously, the GOG operated on the correct assumption that most migrants were transiting Greece to other EU countries. However, now many are remaining in Greece due to a lack of opportunities, or difficulties in resettling, elsewhere.

¶ 7. (SBU) In the short term, the GOG could jumpstart the construction of the long-delayed official Athens mosque. Post has raised this issue at a ministerial level and reported it in the annual Human Rights and International Religious Freedom reports, and we will continue to urge GOG action. Also, Muslim-focused cultural sensitivity training for the Hellenic Police will go a long way towards reducing on-the-ground tension--whether used in operations to evict squatters, or during routine identity checks on the street. We will explore whether EU countries such as the UK and the Netherlands, which are also focused on Greece's migration challenges, can assist. Longer-term, Greece faces the daunting task of coping with continued waves of migration, governing a more multiethnic society in a state founded on a concept of Greek ethnic nationalism, and reforming a deficient asylum and outdated legal immigration process.

MCCARTHY